



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Kalpouzos, I. (2017). The assassination complex: Inside the US government's secret drone warfare programme (Book review). *The British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), doi: 10.1093/bjc/azx025

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/18678/>

Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azx025>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Jeremy Scahill and the Staff of the Intercept, *The Assassination Complex: Inside the US Government's Secret Drone Warfare Programme* (Serpent's Tail, 2016, 234pp.)

Literature on armed drones has spread almost as fast as the drones themselves. They seem to embody an irresistible combination of violence and progress, promising war both total and limited, and precisely administered. Dumbfounded by the bluntness of the recent political transition, we don't have a full picture of how the new US administration will use this weapon of choice. We may wonder if drones will persist as the central 'new paradigm'. One of the arguments advanced in Scahill's book is that drone policy ensured some continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations, despite protestations to the contrary. As Glenn Greenwald puts it in the book's afterword, the policy of assassination by drone represents "a continuation, and in many cases an aggressive expansion, of the core principles of the Bush-Cheney mentality that Obama repeatedly vowed to overturn." (p. 182) Indeed, that's how drones should be seen: as ensuring continuity; as accentuating a particular moment in the 20th century ambition of air power to kill from afar and ensure asymmetry and invulnerability.

The authors of the book have the distinction of being parties to at least one of the conflicts they describe. At the centre of this book is not just the 'war on terror' and the practices of targeting in Afghanistan, Yemen or Somalia revealed, detailed and criticised; there is also an internal conflict, a social and constitutional conflict, one about transparency, surveillance and unaccountable government. Scahill, Greenwald and the staff of the Intercept, as well as Edward Snowden who provides the foreword, position their intervention and analysis in these terms. This accounts for the particular nature of this book. It is the product of investigative journalism and leaks. It uses documents provided by anonymous whistle-blowers, on which it bases sustained investigations of particular aspects of the 'war on terror' and the use of drones, both in the theatres of conflict and in the US. This fight for information, transparency and accountability accordingly frames both the motivation and analysis of the authors. Snowden, in his foreword entitled 'Elected by Circumstance', stresses the parallels with the Vietnam War and the Ellsberg papers (x). He argues that this is a battle for control, against "a political class that feels it must inoculate itself against allegations of weakness" (xvi) and maintain unchecked power "assuming for oneself the authority to execute an individual outside of a battlefield context and without the involvement of any sort of judicial process." (xvii)

In this battle, a whistle-blower who is a "member of the intelligence community", leaked a number of papers revealing the US military's approach to kill/capture operations between 2011 and 2013. Referred to as 'the drone papers', and now available online (see <https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/>) these are mostly presentation slides used by the US military's Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), specifically the Intelligence

Surveillance and Reconnaissance Task Force. The slides have been produced to communicate within the military community information, expectations and frustrations in the practice of targeted killing. Two sets of slides are classified presentations providing insight on targeting practices in Somalia and Yemen from 2011 to 2013. They describe the 'kill chain', ie the process of 'developing a target' to 'authorising a target' and the standards of 'imminence' of a threat or 'near certainty' of the absence of civilian casualties.

Another slide, describing 'Operation Haymarket', illustrates decision making in the characterisation of casualties in the conflict in Afghanistan. In Ryan Devereaux's chapter 'Manhunting in the Hindu Kush' the Haymarket slides are analysed and yield disturbing results. Not only is it clear that, within a period of five months, nine out of ten victims of strikes were not direct targets (156). The practice of characterisation of those killed reveals rather permissive targeting categories, potentially incompatible with the law of armed conflict, as set out in the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions and customary law. According to an intelligence source "with experience working on high-value targeting missions in Afghanistan": "If there is no evidence that proves a person killed in a strike was either not a [military-aged male (MAM)], or was a MAM but not an unlawful enemy combatant, then there is no question," he said. "They label them [Enemies Killed in Action (EKIA)]" (156-7). The slippery slope towards military characterisation, and therefore targeting, are set out, based on the ISR slides, are especially set out in Scahill's chapter Find, Fix, Finish and Cora Courrier's chapter The Kill Chain. Overall, as conceded by Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, former head of the Defence Intelligence Agency, "The drone campaign right now really is only about killing. When you hear the phrase 'capture/kill,' capture is actually a misnomer. In the drone strategy that we have, 'capture' is a lower case 'c.' We don't capture people anymore." (43-4).

The book is accordingly structured around these documents, which, complemented by additional investigative writing, provide crucial angles into the two constitutive aspects of the drone wars: surveillance and targeting. It is in the inter-relation of surveillance and targeting that the drone papers are rather illuminating and that 'the assassination complex' can best be appreciated. Most aspects of the analysis show how, at different levels, the paradigm of war is spreading. This is evident in the example above, illustrating the tendency to identify or, post-death, characterise targets as military. It is also evident in how military practice, logic and categorisation is seeping into civilian categories with the militarisation of police surveillance practice. In Scahill's and Margot Williams' chapter Stingrays at Home we see how surveillance technology developed for military purposes is 'imported' and 'trickles down' to law enforcement (125-6), the 'war on terror' often cited by police as reason and justification. (127) Excerpts from market literature add chilling hilarity: "Are you trying to monitor a huge political protest? Look no further than DRT. Nicknamed 'dirt boxes,' these devices can locate up to 10,000 targets...The best

thing...is the fact that no one may ever know you've used one. Just be careful – if your targets do figure out..., and you haven't gotten a warrant, they may be able to convince a judge to throw out all the evidence.” (130).

Perhaps the apex of the conflation of law and enforcement and war fighting is to be found in the terror 'watchlists'. These range from the remarkably expansive labels and associations leading to the inclusion in a no fly list – the mechanics and ballooning of which is discussed in Scahill's and Ryan Devereaux's *Death and the Watchlist* – to the inclusion in the list of targets. A further leaked document, reproduced in p. 5, visualises the terror "watchlist" as it appears in the terminals of personnel conducting drone operations, linking SIM card codes to specific individuals in order to geolocate them and target them. In Scahill's and Greenwald's *Death by Metadata*, the process of 'tracking and wacking' (p. 99) is explored and the occasional unreliability of geolocation technology discussed. "This isn't a science. This is an art", according to a former JSOC drone operator (p. 102-3). It is the art of 'compressing' and 'cuing' 'kill chains'. It is the art of "find, fix, finish."

In this interplay between visualisation and military slang, the *Assassination Complex* is at its most evocative. Acronyms, euphemisms and sport metaphors, combine bullpen talk and executive professionalism. Borrowing from Sven Lindqvist's *The History of Bombing* the book is interspersed with keywords, such as 'jackpot', 'blink', 'footprint', 'touchdown', 'orbit' and 'kill chain'. They are quite illuminating – both of the actual operations they describe and of the underlying ethos and the subjectivity of the relevant actors.

In the flurry of publications in relation to drone warfare there are more informative, systematic or scholarly books. In terms of investigative journalism, Andrew Cockburn's, *The Kill Chain* (2016) provides a more complete account of the balances and tensions within the US government. This includes the tensions between the CIA and the military and between the military and the navy, in the prioritisation of particular technological projects and weapons manufacturing. It also provides a coherent narrative of the constant betrayal of the promises of precision in drone targeting. *The Drone Memos: Targeted Killing, Secrecy, and the Law*, edited by Jameel Jaffer (The New Press, 2016) contains a number of, in some cases previously classified, documents that offer more detail on the criteria of classification of targets, for example, or the avowed logic behind the formulation of policy.

But the *Assassination Complex* is a document in itself. It is a snapshot of the battle over drones, surveillance and targeting. Combative, revelatory and engaged, it can be seen as a single act of resistance against the spread of the 'forever war' – of both political and scholarly importance.